

'YOU SEE LIVES BEING DESTROYED'

TPA/RPS Environmental Bursary recipient Tessa Bunney explains why she is documenting a fishing community's fight for survival

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'Jamie and Paul Widdowfield check their lobster pots on Sarah Beth off Hartlepool, September 2022' by Tessa Bunney



'Teesside and North Yorkshire coast fishermen join environmental campaigners to protest at Teesworks entrance, Redcar, 14 December 2022' by Tessa Bunney



'Fishermen sail to South Gare for a Save Our Sea protest against dredging, 19 May 2022' by Tessa Bunney

“Over the years I’ve worked with lots of farmers, small food producers, and people that have a connection to the landscape”

The waters of Teesside were teeming with life, but rather than the usual crabs and lobsters that have sustained the local fishing industry for generations, they were awash with protesting fishermen. Angry fishermen.

It was May 2022 and fishing boats from communities including Whitby and Hartlepool had sailed en masse to South Gare – an area of reclaimed land on the mouth of the River Tees – where workers rallied against dredging in the North Sea. The fishermen were claiming the dredging was churning up toxic sludge that was destroying the industry. As they sailed, they let off flares and chanted: “Stop the poison, stop the dredge.”

This was just the latest in a series of incidents that photographer Tessa Bunney had witnessed as she documented fishermen working along the

northern coastlines. It was also the spark of an idea that would lead to her successful bid in 2022 for The Photographic Angle/RPS Environmental Bursary – and her subsequent ongoing series *Save our Sea*.

“Over the years, I’ve worked with lots of farmers, small food producers, and people that have a connection to the landscape, often through food,” explains Bunney now. A project with foragers led her to one involving shrimpers and traditional fishermen in Morecambe Bay. “I asked one of them if I could photograph him over a year and see the different types of fishing he did. In the end it was two years. I met other fishermen in that village and around the coast, and it all started there.”

For more than 30 years Bunney has photographed rural life in the UK and around



'Stan Rennie checks his lobster pots off Hartlepool, October 2022' by Tessa Bunney

the world. Her projects can generally be defined by what underpins them – the close collaboration between observer and observed, photographer and subject. *Going to the Sand* was her first long-term introduction to the lives of inshore fishermen in Morecambe Bay, an area just south of the Lake District covering some 120 square miles. The ongoing project, begun in 2018, sparked a touring exhibition and a book. *Save our Sea* can be seen as a natural second step along the path that began with *Going to the Sand*.

Now working across Teesside and Yorkshire, Bunney has managed to forge countless relationships with the fishing community that have given her an in-depth understanding of

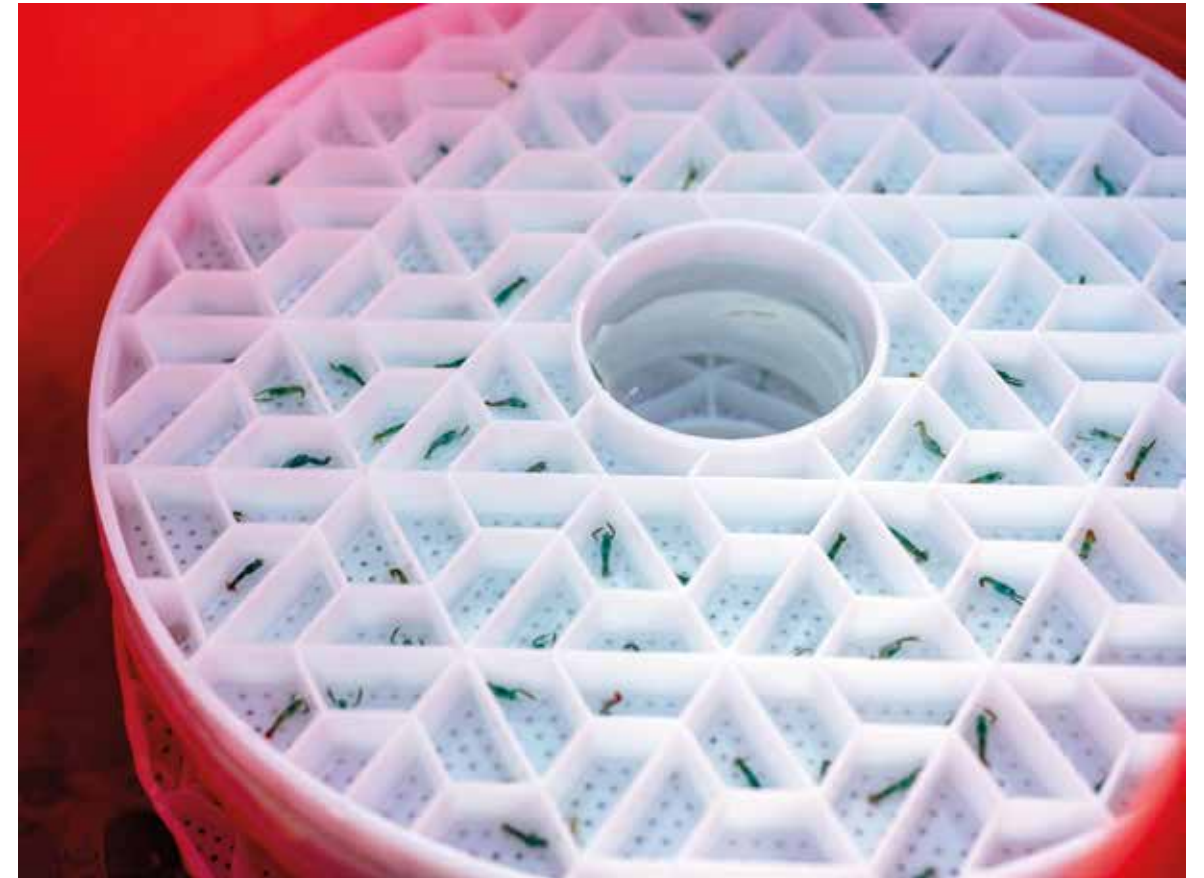
local concerns and traditions – unlike the journalists who popped by in May 2022 for the protest but swiftly left. Even so, making such connections has been a challenge at times.

“It’s not been without its difficulties,” she admits. “The fishermen are who they are. In the beginning, at Morecambe Bay, one or two fishermen were quite gregarious and up for it, whereas some of the others took a bit longer. They all know each other, but I wouldn’t say they all get on. I mean, they like to know what each other are doing – it’s competitive within villages.”

How then does a photographer build such relationships? “I think it’s about being genuine,” says Bunney. “I was genuinely interested in



Peter Race bands lobsters on board MFV Silent Shores off Redcar, June 2023 by Tessa Bunney



‘Juvenile lobsters reared by Whitby Lobster Hatchery at the Yorkshire town’s fish market’ by Tessa Bunney

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the subject and I discovered a lot of stuff that is not particularly something I would share. It’s about trust.

“Before I started I’d done magazine and freelance jobs where I’d go and meet fishermen for five minutes. [My newer projects] were like a big, long term, getting-to-know-people commitment.”

Bunney’s focus is on the fallout from the mass crustacean deaths along England’s north-east coast in October 2021, but it’s ultimately a story of people and community.

“It’s been quite stressful and at some points it’s not been that enjoyable,” she says. “You see people’s lives being destroyed. You see the people who should be helping them not helping them. That’s not been great, to be honest.

“But the actual individuals, they have been ... I just don’t know the words. It’s quite extraordinary. To take people like me and film crews and scientists out to show them what they do and see first-hand what is happening ... they’ve had to work together on that.”

Bunney has certainly benefited from the fishermen having a story to tell and wanting to tell it. “In a way, it was easier [than *Going to the Sand*] because there was a specific reason for doing it. I think the fishermen felt nobody was listening to them, nobody believed them, nobody wanted to help them. There was no one else documenting it, but then as time has gone on, they have now got a feature film being made about them and it was all over every newspaper.”

Mass deaths of crabs and lobsters have now been reported each year since 2021, including in the autumn of 2023. Last year also brought a report into these occurrences in the North Sea, but it failed to reach a conclusion. It did, however, say that dredging was “exceptionally unlikely” to be the cause. The UK government has previously reported that the cause was likely an algal bloom. Whatever the cause, the years since it began have been devastating for the fishing community.

Because of the personal nature of the project, Bunney has seen first-hand how individuals have



'Phil Scarff, along with his brothers who are lobster fishermen, collects winkles on the beach at Saltburn-by-the-Sea four days a month to supplement his income'
by Tessa Bunney



'Fishermen's protest against Tees dredging outside Teesworks, Redcar, on 14 December 2022' by Tessa Bunney

“It would be nice for the fishermen to have something in public that tells their story, rather than having to tell it themselves”



'A female lobster is v-notched before being returned to the water, marking it as illegal for landing' by Tessa Bunney



'Environmentalist Sally Bunce on board the Sarah Beth to collect sediment samples from the River Tees estuary prior to dredging, January 2023' by Tessa Bunney

been affected. There is no end in sight either – not for the mass deaths, not for *Save our Sea*.

“Normally something happens, something changes, or there’s a big event,” says Bunney, explaining how her projects usually come to an end. “More often than not someone says, ‘Would you like to have an exhibition?’ and that makes me work towards a specific date. With this particular story? Although I enjoy being at sea, I don’t need to go on any more boats other than to see what they are catching and how that is changing. But I think I’ll keep going – there are still many different boats, and fishermen and stories and places to see.

“I was speaking to a guy the other day. He said, ‘It would be nice for the fishermen to have

something in public that tells their story, rather than having to tell it themselves.’ And it would be nice to have an outdoor exhibition which toured along the north-east coast.”

Where it will end is uncertain, but already the project has resulted in striking documentary photography that will help to land the fishermen’s message. And, for now at least, Bunney will still be there, on the frontline of the fishing crisis, ensuring these events are preserved for the future.

The RPS and The Photographic Angle (TPA) together offer a one-year bursary to support a photographic project promoting environmental awareness. Apply for a 2024 RPS Bursary from February. rps.org/bursaries tessabunney.co.uk